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Speaking Freely: Self-Generated Language in University English Class "Free-Talk" Activities

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自由に話す：大学英語クラスの自己生成言語 "フリートーク"活動

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Abstract: This paper reports on an eight-week study of the frequency with which freshman university students, in free-talk warmup activities at the beginning of weekly English communication classes, use language studied and practiced during previous weeks' classes. It also reports on the students' reliance on basic questions, particularly "Do you like?" and "What __ do you like?/What's your favorite __?", during these warmup activities. The study found that there is a high reliance on such basic questions when first-year university students have the opportunity to converse on topics of their choice, with a somewhat lower tendency on their part to practice questions studied and learned in previous class sessions. This paper also explores low willingness to speak, learner anxiety, lack of in-class communicative opportunities, and disinterest in textbook topics as issues possibly affecting their language choices.

Key words: communicative approach, communicative tasks, willingness to communicate, learner anxiety, textbook content, goal setting, self-generated language

1. Introduction

Students in Japan have six years of mandatory English classes in junior high and high school prior to university entrance – and in many cases, have English-learning experience in elementary school as well. As such, the linguistic content of those pre-university classes, as well as the speaking opportunities provided in them, invariably have an impact on university students' language choices in the communicative tasks and activities frequently conducted in freshman English classes, particularly those taught by native English speakers. However, their instructors at least presumably hope that this impact is not too dominant – that when given opportunities to speak English in university classes, students will not merely rely on simple language learned in childhood and adolescence but will also experiment with newly learned English.

When given time to engage in "free-talk" activities in university classes, do students try to practice asking questions in English that they have learned in previous classes over the course of the university semester? Or do they tend to rely on simple, commonly used questions, such as those involving the discussion of likes and dislikes, that they learned in junior high or elementary school?

2. Literature Review

While there has been an increase in emphasis on speaking and communicative language approaches in English language education in Japan (Nishino, 2011; Tahira, 2012), certain factors present in the minds of both learners and teachers have been identified by researchers as hindrances in free-rein language production. These factors may inhibit learners' willingness or ability to experiment

with recently learned language, leaving them feeling "attached" to simpler language, including questions revolving around likes and dislikes.

One such factor identified in the literature involves the sorts of conversation topics featured in English language textbooks. Siegel (2014), for instance, in a study measuring the frequency of textbook topics actually discussed in English by Japanese students with their non-Japanese peers at a university placing high emphasis on English and on internationalization, found "self" topics (including likes and dislikes) to be the most frequently appearing textbook theme.

Even when textbook material features topics beyond likes and dislikes, there is evidence in the literature that such topics often do not interest students. Wolf (2013), for instance, found that when learners are given a chance to select topics and speak on them freely, they frequently discard the contents of formal lessons and textbooks, tending instead to opt for language and topics with which they are comfortable.

Other research efforts reveal a lack of confidence as a possible impediment on Japanese learners' willingness to communicate using language beyond basic stock questions or phrases (Hashimoto, 2002; Matsuoka & Evans, 2005; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004). Learner anxiety, long highlighted in the literature as a hindrance to L2 communication among Japanese learners (Templin, 1995), was found by Matsuura, Chiba, and Hilderbrandt (2001) to increase when students enter university, where communicative approaches are employed more often than the traditional grammar/translation methods learners are used to from junior high and high school.

More recent research suggests that these communicative approaches have not been widely employed by teachers in Japanese secondary schools in the past decade or so. Nishino (2011), Underwood (2012), and Otani (2013), for example, found discrepancies between Japanese high school English teachers' beliefs in communicative language teaching (which were generally positive) and their actual implementation of it in class (which was largely infrequent). Underwood (2012) further found that there are institutional barriers to the integration of communicative approaches and grammar instruction, including a lack of teacher training relevant to such approaches and a focus on university examination preparation. More recently, Stroupe, Fenton, MacDonald, and Riley (2016) found that Japanese high school classes still emphasize form-focused instruction, mainly consisting of grammar study and repetitive drills, over communicative approaches; this further evidences a lack of free-speaking activities or guided discussions for Japanese learners prior to entering university.

3. Research Question

The extent to which pre-university English class content and practices "bleed over" into learners' linguistic choices in their university classes is the focus of the small-scale study described in this paper.

This study explored the following research questions:

(1) How often do students in a weekly university English communication class, in free-talk warmup activities, ask questions learned/studied in previous weeks' classes?
(2) How often do these students, instead of practicing questions learned in previous weeks' classes, fall back on simple, common stock questions (especially involving likes and favorites) learned in primary and secondary school?

4. Methodology and Participants

The data-collection methodology behind this study was two-pronged, involving:

(a) A survey of current and former assistant language teachers (ALTs) on the most frequent English questions asked by their elementary, junior high, and high school students

(b) Weekly in-class warmup activities, in which first-year students at a four-year public university in northern Japan were asked to decide their own questions to ask in pairs

Survey of ALTs: First, a survey was taken of current and former ALTs in Japanese elementary, junior high, and high schools. A total of 44 ALTs took part in this survey; most of them teach or have taught in Japanese elementary schools and junior high schools (76% and 64%, respectively), with a smaller percentage (38%) teaching or having taught in high schools

The ALT survey sought to determine the frequency with which certain questions in English were asked of them by their students, not only during "free-talk" periods in class but also outside of class, such as during lunch, recess, or spontaneous encounters in the hallways.

The survey contained three questions:

- ***Q1: I currently teach, or formerly taught, in ___.***
  Respondents were asked to indicate whether they teach or have taught in Japanese elementary schools, junior high schools, and/or high schools. More than one response was allowed, as many ALTs in Japan do not teach at only one school level.
- ***Q2: During "free talk" activities or moments in class, what questions do/did students often ask you and/or each other in English?***
  Respondents were asked which questions students often ask during warmups or other "free-talk" occasions during class. ALTs could choose as many students' questions as applied from a list of 13 choices, and could write in their own responses as well.
- ***Q3: Outside of class (lunchtime, recess, in hallway, etc.), what questions do/did students often ask you in English?***
  Respondents were asked which questions students often ask/asked them in school situations

outside of class. This question featured the same 13 answer choices as Q2; participants could mark as many choices as applied.

The goal of this survey was to establish some concrete evidence that certain basic question topics – such as likes and dislikes, age, place of origin, hobbies, and family – are prevalent in the minds of Japanese learners of English during childhood and adolescence when they have free rein to experiment with the language.

University in-class activity: At the beginning of each weekly 90-minute class during the first half of a 15-week semester, a free-talk warmup activity was carried out in which students in two freshmen English Communication classes generated their own questions in English. This activity, which was performed for approximately 10 to 15 minutes at the start of each session, involved 26 students in one class and 28 in the other for a total of 54 participants.

At the start of every class over the research period, each student was given three small slips of paper and asked to write an English question of his or her choice on each slip. (See the Appendix for samples.) The students then mixed around the classroom and did "rock-scissors-paper" after pairing up; the winner then asked the loser one of the questions on his or her slips. (Students were encouraged to not just ask and answer questions, but also to have brief conversations based on them.) The winning student gave the slip of paper with the question that he or she had asked to the loser; students would then pair up with someone else and repeat the process. Students who rid themselves of all of their slips (the three with which they started, and any others given them by other students during the game) were allowed to complete the activity and sit down.

When the entire warmup activity was finished, all of the slips of paper were collected so that the questions written on them could be tabulated as data for this study. The rest of the 90-minute class was spent carrying out an English communication class using a commercial textbook (Pak, 2007) as well as instructor-created materials. Table 1 lists the key questions that were learned/practiced during the instructional portion of each weekly class.

Data from these in-class warmup activities were collected over a period spanning Weeks 2 through 8 of the two classes. (The first week of class was essentially an "orientation session" to the course, so no data pertaining to this study could be produced.) Questions written on the slips during each week's warmup activity were analyzed to determine how frequently learners used questions learned and practiced during all of the previous weeks' classes.

The goal of this activity, which facilitated the sort of pair work and group communication typically preferred by learners over individual speech (Shachter, 2018; Woodrow, 2006), was to ascertain if students were generating an increased variety of questions from week to week (especially

questions learned and practiced in previous weeks' lessons) or if they tended to fall back on easier, basic, "tried-and-true" English questions from their elementary, junior high, and high school days, particularly those involving likes and preferences. To avoid swaying or affecting the language generated by the learners, they were not encouraged or advised in any way to use questions they had learned or practiced in previous classes.

The data from this activity were compared with the results of the ALT survey, to investigate whether the language habitually employed by learners in primary and secondary school was being "carried over" and was impacting their language choices in university.

Week	Key questions from previous week
3	Did you __? Have you ever __? Hobbies/free time
4	Can you __? Can you play __? Are you a __ fan?
5	Could you lend me __? Can I borrow __?
6	Have you ever been to _? Have you ever been -ing?
7	Future plans: What do you see yourself doing?
8	Do you exercise? Questions on health/diet

Table 1. Questions learned/practiced during instructional portions of weekly classes.

5. Results

In short, this study found that "like" questions dominated Japanese elementary, junior high, and high school learners' language choices during free-talk opportunities with ALTs both within and outside of class. It was further found that these questions seem to "bleed over" into learners' free-talk language in their first-year university classes, remaining somewhat popular as a free-talk language choice even as learners are introduced to other questions they had the opportunity to practice as the semester progressed.

Survey of ALTs: As shown in Table 2, "Do you like __?" and "What __ do you like?" were reported by the most respondents (93% and 79%, respectively) as questions learners often asked them during in-class free-talk occasions. "Do you like __?" was also identified by the highest number of ALTs (59%) as a question frequently asked by students outside of class (lunchtime, recess, hallway encounters, etc.), with "What __ do you like?" coming in third place at 45%. In short, these survey results suggest that "like/favorite" questions are a highly frequent language choice among Japanese learners of English from elementary through high school.

	in class (*rank / %*)	outside class (*rank / %*)
"Do you like __?" (yes/no)	1 *(93% - 40 ALTs)*	1 *(59% - 26 ALTs)*
"What (sport, food, etc.) do you like?"	2 *(79% -34 ALTs)*	3 *(45% - 20 ALTs)*
"How old are you?"	3 *(72% - 31 ALTs)*	4 *(39% - 17 ALTs)*
"Where are you from?"	4 *(63% - 27 ALTs)*	T-5 *(36% - 16 ALTs)*
"How are you?"	5 *(53% - 23 ALTs)*	2 *(50% - 22 ALTs)*
"Do you have __?"	6 *(49% - 21 ALTs)*	T-5 *(36% - 16 ALTs)*

Table 2. Questions most often asked to ALTs by elementary, JHS, and HS students.

University in-class activity: As seen in Figure 1, the first-year university students asked "like/favorite" questions rather frequently during the warmup activities in Weeks 3 and 4, the first two weeks of the semester in which data were collected. In Week 3, half of the questions generated by the students (73 of 146 total questions) were of the "like/favorite" variety; in Week 4, such questions comprised 38% (53 of 139) of the total. Previously learned and practiced questions, meanwhile, appeared infrequently during Weeks 3 and 4 (18% and 17%, respectively) on the students' warmup activity paper slips.

Over the following two weeks (Weeks 5 and 6), learners began to use "like/favorite" questions somewhat less frequently, while using questions learned in previous weeks' classes a bit more often. In fact, questions previously practiced in class were used slightly more frequently than "like" questions in Week 5 (32% to 31%). In Week 6, previously learned questions and "like" questions were used at an equal rate (28%).

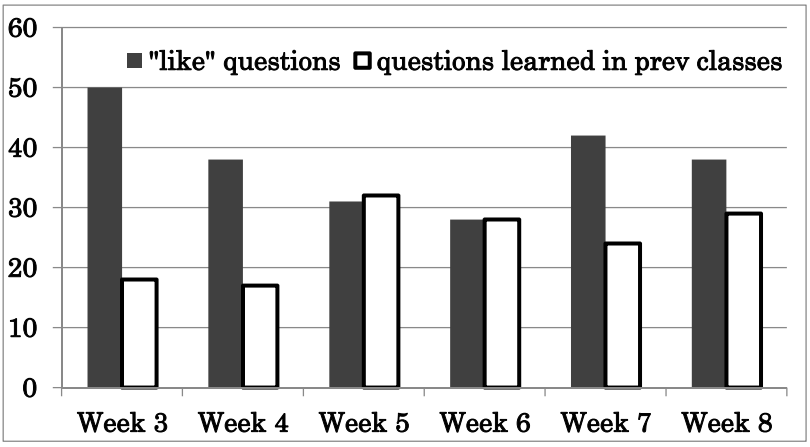

Figure 1. Percentages of "like/favorite" questions and questions learned in previous weeks' classes, asked by learners during weekly free-talk warmup activities

In the final two weeks of the experiment period, "like/favorite" questions again appeared more frequently on students' slips of paper than previously learned questions did – particularly in Week 7, where the former outpaced the latter 42% to 24%.

Overall, of the 834 questions generated by the university students during their 12 warmup activities, 313 (37%) were "like/favorite" questions and 205 (25%) were questions learned and practiced in previous class sessions. The remaining 316 questions (38%), which mostly involved names, birthdays, hometowns, ages, and other miscellaneous topics, fell into neither category.

Table 3 details the same data as in Figure 1, but with results for the "like/favorite" question type broken down into two subtypes: (a) yes-or-no "Do you like?" questions, and (b) "What __ do you like?/What's/Who's your favorite __?" questions. This table shows that the "wh-" subtype was asked by learners much more frequently than the yes-or-no subtype – nearly two and a half times more often overall, including nearly seven times more often in Week 5.

Week	Total ?s	Rate of use, "like" questions		Rate of use, previous weeks' questions
3	*n=146*	*Do you like _?* 15% *(n=22)* *What __ do you like?* 35% *(n=51)*	**50%** *(n=73)*	**18%** *(n=26)*
4	*n=139*	*Do you like _?* 12% *(n=17)* *What __ do you like?* 26% *(n=36)*	**38%** *(n=53)*	**17%** *(n=23)*
5	*n=137*	*Do you like _?* 4% *(n=5)* *What __ do you like?* 27% *(n=37)*	**31%** *(n=42)*	**32%** *(n=44)*
6	*n=159*	*Do you like _?* 9% *(n=15)* *What __ do you like?* 19% *(n=30)*	**28%** *(n=45)*	**28%** *(n=44)*
7	*n=117*	*Do you like _?* 11% *(n=13)* *What __ do you like?* 31% *(n=36)*	**42%** *(n=49)*	**24%** *(n=28)*
8	*n=136*	*Do you like _?* 15% *(n=20)* *What __ do you like?* 23% *(n=31)*	**38%** *(n=51)*	**29%** *(n=40)*
Total	*n=834*	*Do you like _?* 11% *(n=92)* *What __ do you like?* 26% *(n=221)*	**37%***(n=313)*	**25%** *(n=205)*

Table 3. Rates of warmup use for questions practiced in previous weeks' classes, and for "like/favorite" questions (divided into yes/no and "what" question subtypes)

6. Discussion

That the "like/favorite" questions were used in the first week of data collection (Week 3) far more frequently than previously learned/practiced questions (50% to 18%) was not surprising, given that there had only been one class prior to that week – and thus, not many previously learned/practiced questions from which to draw. That 32-percentage-point gap was narrowed to 21 points in Week 4; in Week 5, when learners had three weeks' worth of previously learned/practiced questions from which to draw, such questions were used slightly more often than the "like/favorite" questions were.

Because of that result, and because more questions would be learned and practiced in subsequent weeks that would be added to the students' language "arsenal," it was expected at that point that over the remainder of the experiment period, the studied-in-class questions might become

more prevalent in use than the "like/favorite" questions. However, that did not occur; the "like/favorite" questions were again used more often over the last two weeks of the experiment period, particularly in Week 7.

While the very large first-week gap between "like/favorite" question use and previously learned question use had been narrowed greatly, the former type of question was still being used somewhat often. Students' "repertoire" of language was gradually building over the course of the research period, and yet by the end of the period, "like/favorite" questions had accounted for more than one-third of the total warmup questions for the six weeks.

Wolf (2013), in a study involving 101 Japanese university students, found that learners reported higher confidence, interest, and knowledge in self-selected topics than in their textbook-assigned topics. This phenomenon may have come into play with this study's learners as well; simply put, the language being practiced and learned in their textbooks may not have been interesting enough, or it may have not adequately built on their confidence or previously acquired knowledge regarding English or any other field of study. This factor may have kept them grounded in their "comfort zone" of like/dislike discussions, which would lend themselves to learners conversing about topics of actual interest.

Another factor perhaps coming into play involves goal-setting; research efforts both in the past (e.g. Templin, 1995) and more currently (Munezane, 2015) suggest that having clear communication aims typically leads to increases in learners' confidence and willingness to communicate. In the communicative activity carried out for this study, students seemingly felt they had a choice of either using textbook-centered language just for the sake of using it, or speaking about topics that were both personal and fairly simple to discuss. The results show that they were not entirely averse to making the former choice, but seemed to a certain degree more comfortable with the latter – hence, the high frequency of like/dislike questions.

Though "like/favorite" questions were predictably more prevalent with regard to learners' chosen language than questions learned and practiced in weekly classes, the fact that the students asked "wh-" questions significantly more often than yes-or-no questions emerged as an interesting finding. This result suggests that although students "fell back on" questions concerning likes and favorites to a great degree, at least they were more likely to try forming the more structurally and grammatically complex "wh-" variety of "like/favorite" questions. It also suggests that they were interested in engaging in somewhat broader discourse by asking questions that yielded open-ended answers – as opposed to the generally limited topical range of conversation produced by yes-or-no questions.

7. Pedagogical Implications

One seemingly common reality in Japanese junior high school and high school English classes is a lack of opportunities for learners to speak a great deal of English, which must be remedied as part of an effort to help learners' become more comfortable with engaging in language beyond discussing likes and dislikes. Nishino and Watanabe (2008), for instance, found that many Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) in high schools were not trained in communicative approaches in university, and had no time or opportunity to learn about them after becoming teachers. Although efforts have been undertaken to address this problem (MEXT, 2010; 2012), some studies find that most high school English classes, for a variety of reasons, are still conducted mainly in Japanese. Suzuki and Roger (2014), for instance, found that foreign language anxiety in JTEs hinders their willingness and ability to use English in class; while Nishino (2008) identified university entrance examination preparation as being of higher priority than communicative proficiency for many high school JTEs. Changes in mindset and approaches are needed, therefore, in order to create more opportunities for students to speak more English prior to entering university.

A lack of student interest in textbook contents and topics has been found to negatively affect students' eagerness to speak English (Aubrey, 2011; Matsuura, Chiba, & Hilderbrandt, 2001; Stroupe, Rundle, & Tomita, 2016). It is possible, therefore, that the learners involved in this study could not connect the textbook contents to their own lives, experience, or knowledge. In addition, the frequency with which "like/favorite" questions were asked may indicate that describing personal interests and preferences is a major communication goal for these particular learners. Eliminating irrelevant or uninteresting topics in class would likely increase learners' willingness to speak and to broaden their language choices beyond the like/dislike variety, as would making whatever possible efforts to determine learners' goals and motivations for learning English. Instructors can conduct classes without textbooks, for example, or even "put students in the driver's seat" by asking them to select topics or even prepare simple lesson plans for weekly classes.

Another factor to keep in mind from a pedagogical standpoint is that Japanese learners of English tend to prefer pair work and group activities over speaking individually in front of groups (Cutrone, 2009; Shachter, 2018; Stroupe, Rundle, & Tomita, 2016; Woodrow, 2006); the former approaches should be pursued to maximize willingness to communicate and reduce learner anxiety. The in-class activity conducted as part of this study's methodology was effective in creating a one-on-one atmosphere in which learners could practice their English in a relaxed and enjoyable manner, and although much of the self-generated language was fairly simple grammatically and lexically, at least the learners generally made the most of the speaking time that the activity gave them.

Finally, expanding learners' opportunities to communicate in English would in turn lead to them speaking about a wider variety of topics beyond simple likes and dislikes. Such expansion cannot

adequately happen, however, if grammar, direct translation, rote memorization, and examination preparation – long held up as a focus on English classes in Japan (Kamada, 1987; Templin, 1995) – continue to be emphasized. While these elements of language instruction have a place in language learning and should not be completely abandoned, they should be seen as a means to an end – communicative competence – and not as ends in themselves.

8. Limitations and Future Research Possibilities

This study involved a relatively small number of learners, and the research period lasted for seven weeks. Research featuring more participants and conducted over a longer time period would potentially shed additional light on the choices made by foreign-language learners in free-rein activities. It would carry the added benefit of exposing learners to more textbook units and materials and therefore more language, with which they would have the opportunity to experiment if they were to so choose.

Another research possibility could involve surveying university-level learners on the practice of communicative approaches (or lack thereof) in their language classes prior to university, as well as their views on and comfort with such approaches. The literature provides significant evidence that the employment of communicative approaches in and before high school is infrequent in Japan, but that students often do enjoy them – which led to the assumption that the learners involved in this study probably did not have many chances to speak English in pre-university classes but may have appreciated the opportunity. This study did not, however, actually seek to verify this assumption. Should a similar study be carried out again, querying students on these questions would provide insight into their thoughts on communicative language-learning approaches and their opportunities to take part in them prior to entering university.

Future research efforts could incorporate a similar querying of study participants on the type of textbook or learning materials they would like to use in their classes, as well as on favorite topics and language-learning goals. The study described in this paper was begun at the beginning of the semester; beginning a similar study further along into a semester might be advantageous in that it could provide time for the instructor to glean ideas and feedback from learners on their particular language-learning interests and needs. The additional class time prior to actually commencing the study would also expose the learners to a greater amount of language, thus giving them a wider range of question material with which to practice in subsequent communicative activities.

The learners involved in this study were members of two different classes in which the same textbook and instructor-generated material were used. Using different learning material in different classes in the same course could be a revealing approach for further research into learners' self-generated language; it would allow for a comparison of the language choices they make in

free-talk warmup activities. For instance, one class could use a commercial textbook and teacher-provided content, and another using a textbook-less approach with material and conversation topics generated by learners. Alternatively, textbook and teacher-provided material could be eschewed altogether in favor of topics and content chosen by learners themselves, with the odds being high that learners in different classes would choose different material. In either case, data related to learner-generated language could then be analyzed from the different classes, to see if there are any differences in terms of the types of questions and language generated during their free-talk activities.

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Appendix: Samples of students' question slips used for free-talk warmup activities: "like/favorite" questions (top two pairs), questions learned/practiced in previous weeks (middle two pairs), and questions not fitting either category (bottom two pairs).